# Macbeth-poster

**William Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* (1606)**

**Clash of Interpretations**

**Overview**

When reading literature, the most fundamental academic activity is to make an interpretation of the work, to describe what the work means and how its use of language produces its meaning. To be persuasive, interpretations of literary works must be grounded closely on the text. Careful and analytic reasoning should explicate the ways in which a textual passage supports the interpretive argument: the claim about what the literary work means.

Argumentation about literature most frequently places interpretations in engagement with and against each other. Literary critics, journalists, professors, teachers, intellectuals – whoever is publicly or professionally discussing a literary work – argue in favor of their understanding of an important work of literature and against competing, alternate interpretations. To support their argument – their own interpretation – these ‘literary workers’ refer to textual evidence, and they reason about the historical context, relationship to the larger work, literary devices used, and other aspects of the text and its meaning, connecting textual evidence to their interpretative claim. In an academic setting, we can understand the learning-directed ‘problems’ and ‘solutions’ in studying literature as a ‘clash of interpretations.’

In Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, one of the central, enduring, and artistically profound questions is: **Who is primarily responsible for the tragic outcome that befalls Macbeth?** And though we focus on Macbeth’s demise, including discussion of his wife’s unhappy ending is certainly relevant, too. We will conduct a Clash of Interpretations in which teams of students will build developed arguments – contentions – with evidence and interpretive reasoning, as well as counter-arguments against other interpreting teams, defending one of the three fundamental and contrasting interpretive answers to the question of primary responsibility for the play’s tragic ending.

**Interpretation A: The witches and the malevolent fate that they represent**

**are primarily responsible for Macbeth’s tragic outcome.**

**Interpretation B: Lady Macbeth is primarily responsible for Macbeth’s**

**tragic outcome.**

**Interpretation C: Macbeth himself is primarily responsible for his own**

**tragic outcome.**

**Method**

Clash of Interpretations: *Macbeth* should be implemented over about 5 50-minute class periods, using the following method.

1. Students in the class should be divided into 3 groups. Ideally, each of the 3 groups will have a number of students that is divisible by 3. So, for example, if 24 students in the class: instead of splitting the class into 3 groups of 8, it would be better to have 2 groups of 9 and one group of 6. The instructor should group students based on pedagogical preference, though A.C.E. typically recommends heterogeneous ability grouping or random count-off.

2. Each of the 3 groups should be further subdivided into 3 teams. These teams will be arbitrarily assigned one of the three interpretations answering the question: Who is primarily responsible for the tragic outcome of Macbeth? So now the class should have three groups of students, within which are three teams, one team representing each interpretation.

3. Each team should discuss and determine what role each student on the team will take. There are four speaking components in Clash of Interpretations: (a) contentions, (b) counter-arguments, (c) rebuttal, and (d) argument evaluation. Every student must have a speaking role, and (if there are fewer than four students on a team) no student should have more than two speaking roles.

4. Team members should also discuss and determine who will be working on the advance preparation of which of the two speaking components that are prepared prior to the Clash: contentions and counter-arguments. This means, in effect, that the students who will deliver the rebuttals and argument evaluations should sign on to help prepare one of the other two components with teammates.

5. Every student should be given the following resources, preferably in electronic format:

\* Contention Builder Form

\* Counter-Argument Builder Form

\* Clash of Interpretations Flow Sheet (three sheets)

\* Macbeth: Selected Passages

\* Clash of Interpretations Format

6. Reviewing the Contention Builder Form, the instructor should either collaboratively and interactively build with students a model of a single contention, or she should distribute a model to the students. This is an opportunity to conduct ‘guided talk’ and ‘reflective questioning’ in order to highlight criteria for effective argumentation, aligned with Argument-Centered Education’s ‘Key Components’ guidelines – e.g., ‘argumentative claims’ are focused, distinct from each other, clear; ‘evidence’ is aligned with the claim, sufficient, analytically reasoned to connect to the claim.

The instructor should take time here to explain the relationship between the argumentative interpretation (overall), the two contentions that advance and ‘prove’ the interpretation to be true, and the evidence and reasoning that supports each contention claim. These three levels of argument exist hierarchically:

**Argumentative Interpretation**

**Contention Claim Contention Claim**

**Evidence A Evidence B Evidence A Evidence B**

**Reasoning Reasoning Reasoning Reasoning**

**7.** The same should be done with the Counter-Argument Builder Form: the instructor should either lead the class in a collaborative model for counter-arguments to a contention for two argumentative theories, or he should present and explain such a model, prepared in advance. ‘Guided talk’ and ‘reflective questioning’ here should both illuminate the thinking that leads to the formulation of counter-arguments, as well as possible ways in which the counter-arguments could then be responded to and refuted by the group who put forward the contentions originally.

8. Following sufficient orientation on the forms themselves, groups should have 1 – 2 full periods to build their contentions and prospective counter-arguments. (Note that actual counter-arguments will necessarily await the actual Clash of Interpretations, when opposing teams put forward their contentions.)   
  
The instructor should consider pausing mid-way through the period of preparation to calibrate the directionality of the groups by conducting full-class analysis and discussion of volunteered or called-upon examples of student work on the two argument builder forms.

9. The final stage of preparation for the Clash of Interpretations activity is to review with the full class the format, speaking component roles, and flow sheet. See the accompanying documents for the content here.

10. The next class period should be devoted entirely to conducting three simultaneous Clashes of Interpretations. Each of the three groups should be positioned in another part of the classroom. The instructor should time the speaking components, keeping all three groups progressing through the format in parallel with each other. The instructor should also circulate around the three groups, offering prompting, suggestions, encouragement, reinforcement, and answers to questions.

Each student should be completing a flow sheet through the Clash of Interpretations activity, and each student should staple and submit, or email or post to a Google Drive folder or another on-line repository, their flow sheets from the day. These should serve as both formative assessments on students interpretive argumentation work, and as accountability documentation for students’ efforts during class and in preparation.

11. The following class period the instructor should select the best of the three clashes and have this group re-perform their Clash of Interpretations for the full class. The instructor should track the arguments in this iteration on a projected electronic version of the flow sheet. Observing students should also be required to flow the clash; the instructor should consider having students vote for which group ‘won’ the Clash of Interpretations and writing a one-page argumentative justification for their selection.

12. On the next and final class period of this activity, the instructor should lead an interactive, inquiry-based analysis and discussion of the showcased Clash of Interpretations, highlighting the strengths of argumentation and identifying patterns of thinness or insufficiency in students’ literary argumentation, relative to school an d grade-level standards.

This discussion can prompt a final summative assessment: an argumentative essay in which each student argues for their interpretive position, advancing beyond the Clash of Interpretation arguments recorded in the flow sheets, by improving on their contention evidence and reasoning, counter-arguments, refutation of others’ counter-arguments, and final argumentative evaluation.